



Institute on Religion and Public Policy Report

Religious Freedom in Eritrea

Executive Summary

Although the 1997 Constitution provides protections for freedom of religion and conscience, it has not yet been implemented. The country only recognizes 4 religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. Members of unregistered religious groups potentially face harassment, imprisonment, torture, and death. Members of registered religious groups may also face harassment, imprisonment, and interference from the government. The religious freedom situation in Eritrea is widely recognized by both governmental and non-governmental agencies to be among the worst in the world.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world

Legal Status

In 1997, the National Assembly ratified a Constitution that provides broad protection for freedom of religion. Article 8, Section 1 states, “the State shall strive to create opportunities to ensure the fulfillment of citizens’ rights to social justice and economic development and to fulfill their material and spiritual needs.” These rights are further delineated in Article 19, Sections 1 and 4. Section 1 mandates that “every person shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and belief.” Section 4 states, “Every person shall have the freedom to practice any religion and to manifest such practice.” However, this Constitution has yet to be implemented and as such has no bearing on the situation of religious freedom in the country.

The government only recognizes 4 religious groups: the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, Islam, and the Roman Catholic Church. All other religious groups are required to be registered and

approved by the government before they are allowed to conduct religious services and other vital activities. In 2002, the government issued a decree ordering all religious communities to register or face closure. According to the United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report, registration requirements include: “a description of the history of the religious group in the country, an explanation of the uniqueness or benefit that the group offers compared with other religious groups already present, names and personal information of religious leaders, detailed information on assets and property owned by the group, and sources of funding from abroad.” A government committee then reviews the documents and theoretically grants approval only to groups which “conform to the local culture.”

The government routinely fails to approve registrations. The Meherete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Faith Mission Church, and the Baha'i community have not been approved despite complying with all of the necessary registration requirements.

In May 2002, all religious facilities not belonging to the four officially recognized religions were shut down following the government decree. The Office of Religious Affairs told various unregistered religious groups that they would be able to hold religious ceremonies in private residences. However, the ability of such groups to do so varies widely by locale with some local authorities allowing groups to hold services in rented facilities or private residences. In other locations, authorities failed to allow any form of unregistered religious activity, arresting those involved. Religious groups have been informed that “a standing law would be used to prevent unregistered religious groups from holding political or other gatherings in private homes of more than three to five persons.”

Government approval is required for many of the activities that are necessary for a religious community to operate. Government approval is also required for the construction of all religious facilities. The Office of Religious Affairs must grant authorization for the printing and distribution of religious materials and documents.

Government Interference and Abuses of Registered Religious Groups

The government interferes in the everyday workings of registered religious groups at the highest levels. The Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Muslim community in Eritrea have all faced abuses and interference in their religious affairs at the hands of the government. The government required all four of the officially registered to submit reports on the sources of their funding as well as complete list of personnel and property.

The government required all of the registered religious communities to provide the government with a list of religious leaders and clergy in order to enroll them in

national military service. The Muslims, Lutherans, and Orthodox turned in their lists. A percentage of their clergy were granted ID cards which delayed their entry into the military. The rest were enrolled in national military service. The Catholic Church refused to comply. Catholic clergy were given special temporary exemption cards which permitted them to avoid service.

The Eritrean Orthodox Church has arguably endured the worst government interference of the registered Christian groups. In October of 2007, a priest and another church official were arrested during an approved bible study. In December 2006, the government seized control of Church finances. Subsequently, the government set limits on the number of priests allowed to serve in each parish in the country and required all donations made to the Church to be paid into an account from which the monthly salaries of all priests are to be allocated. In August of 2005, the government of Eritrea appointed a lay person to manage and oversee Church operation. His Holiness, Patriarch Abune Antonios was placed under house arrest in Asmara. Subsequently, he was stripped of ecclesiastical authority by the government and a new patriarch was “arbitrarily appointed” on May 27, 2007. The deposed Patriarch remains under house arrest with very limited contact to the outside world and has been reportedly denied medical treatment.

The Catholic Church has faced problems as well. In June of 2008, the Eritrean military “expropriated” church property in the capital. In November of 2007, 13 Catholic missionaries were expelled, reportedly due to the Catholic Church’s refusal to send its clergy to military service.

The Muslim community also faces significant discrimination. The government appoints a Mufti to head the country’s Muslim community, but he is not always supported by the Muslim community. There are reports that over 250 Muslims have been imprisoned over the past 15 years for opposing the state-sponsored Mufti. The leader of an opposition group, Taha Mohammed Nur, died in prison in February of 2008 and the government refused to provide his family with an explanation as to “when, where, or how he died.” Reportedly, Nur was singled out for torture by authorities in an attempt to convince him to encourage other Muslims to recognize the state Mufti. In addition, there is no non-military alternative service for Muslim women who object to serving in the military.

Physical Detention and Abuse of Unregistered Religious Groups

The government routinely arrests members of unregistered religious communities. These individuals are often held for extended periods of time without being charged with a crime in various judicial and military facilities throughout the country. Once these individuals are detained, they are often subject to torture, long periods of detention in metal shipping containers or underground cells, and, in some cases, death. Prisoners from unregistered

Christian groups are often tortured to force them to recant their faith and join one of the officially approved Christian groups.

The number of individuals currently in prison is unknown and estimates vary. However, most reports agree that there are over 2,000 persons held in prisons, police stations, or military facilities for their religious beliefs. The vast majority of these are from various Christian groups. According to Amnesty International, there are over 2,000 prisoners of conscience in Eritrea including dozens of preachers or priests and hundreds of women and children. According to reports cited in the United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report 2008 for Eritrea, there are “over 3,225 Christians from unregistered religious groups detained in prison” and of these there are at “least 37 leaders and pastors of Pentecostal churches in detention, some of for more than 3 years....”

Reportedly hundreds were arrested for their religious beliefs in 2008 alone. The Jehovah's Witnesses in particular have been the subject of systematic repression at the hands of the state. A series of raids and arrests on personal residences and places of employment of Jehovah's Witnesses from July through September of 2008 led to the detention of 20 individuals. In February 2008, 38 Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested.

On May 28, 2008, Eritrean police arrested 34 members, including one woman who was pregnant, of the Berhane Hiwet Church in Keren. On May 24, police arrested 25 Protestants in Adi-Kuala. These individuals were transferred to Wi'a Military Training Center where they were being subject to “harsh military punishment.” Eyewitnesses stated that the prisoners were beaten as they were transported to Wi'a. On January 6, 2008, 35 members of the Faith of Christ Church were arrested and detained for 6 weeks in the city of Massawa.

Prospects for these recent detainees and those held for several years are grim. There are multiple reports of individuals dying at the hands of the government either as a direct result of torture or from government inaction and neglect. There are regular reports of severe beatings of prisoners. Prisoners are often locked in overcrowded metal shipping containers or underground cells, without access to toilets and other sanitation facilities, and exposed to extreme fluctuations in temperature. Prisoners are often given inadequate food and denied proper access to medical attention. Long periods of restraint in excruciatingly painful positions are not uncommon. One technique in which a prisoner laying flat on their stomach has their hands and feet are bound together behind their back is colloquially referred to as “the helicopter.” “The helicopter” is a routine punishment and interrogation technique for religious and political prisoners in Eritrea. According to the BBC, one prisoner was tied in this position for 136 hours in an effort to force him to recant his faith. Another prisoner was tied to a tree in the shape of a crucifix for three days.

It is not uncommon for prisoners to die from the torture and the inadequate and unsanitary conditions to which they are exposed. In July of 2008, Azib Simon, 37, died of malaria following months of prolonged torture at Wi'a Military Training Center. Simon, who contracted malaria a week before her death, was denied medical treatment by authorities. Simon was a member of the Kale-Hiwet Church in Assab. On September 6, 2007, Nigisti Haile, 33, was tortured to death at the Wi'a Military Training Facility after being imprisoned for 18 months. In February of 2007, Magos Solomon Semere was killed at the Adi-Nefase Military Confinement Facility. On October 17, 2006, Immanuel Andegergesh, 23, and Kibrom Firemichel, 30, were severely beaten and died as a result of their injuries.

Military and National Service Abuse Issues

All citizens in Eritrea are required to perform national military service. There are numerous violations of religious freedom within the military itself and with regards to conscientious objectors. There is no law in Eritrea which permits conscientious objection to military service. This causes problems for numerous groups, most notably Jehovah's Witnesses, religious clergy, and Muslims, who object to Muslim female soldiers. The government admits that there are Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims in jail for evading military service.

Three Jehovah's Witnesses, Paulos Eyassu, Isaac Mogos, and Negende Teklemariam, have been held in prison for 14 years for evading military service despite the fact that the largest delineated legal penalty is 2 years. Jehovah's Witnesses who do not serve in the military are not allowed to work in the government, have their business licenses revoked, are evicted from government-owned housing, and are denied exit visas, passports, and other identity documents. In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses marriages are not recognized by civil authorities.

Aside from the problem of conscientious objectors, the military presents many other religious freedom problems. Service personnel are only allowed to worship at facilities of the four approved religious groups. Occasionally, military personnel are allowed to possess religious material and pray independently, but not in groups. Bibles are regularly confiscated from Christians, but Muslims are allowed to have the Quran.

There were several incidents of abuse, torture, and detention of Christian conscripts at the Sawa Defense Training Centre. (Eritrean students are required to attend military training centers such as Sawa to graduate from high school and prepare them for their mandatory military service.) Authorities confiscated more than 1,500 personal bibles from incoming students and proceeded to burn them. Eight students objected; these students were locked in metal shipping containers located at the facility. During the book burning, one source said that "the chief commander of Sawa, Col. Debasai Ghide, gave a warning to all students by telling them that Sawa is a place for patriotism, not a place for 'Pentes'

[Pentecostals].” On January 4, 2007 officials at the facility confiscated 250 bibles and burned them. 35 students were arrested and subjected to “severe military punishment, including physical torture.” In 2006, 100 Bibles were confiscated and burned. 75 Christian students were arrested and tortured. These individuals refused to recant their faith and are reportedly still being held at Sawa.

Conclusion

The current situation of religious freedom in Eritrea is appalling. The government must end the barbaric practices such as torture, including “the helicopter,” and the detention of prisoners in metal shipping containers immediately. Eritrea must release the thousands of men, women, and children it is currently holding in police stations, jails, and military facilities throughout the country for no other reason than their religious faith. The government must end its involvement and interference in the functioning of religious communities in Eritrea. The Eritrean Orthodox Patriarch Abune Antonios must be released and restored to power and the Muslim community must be allowed to choose its own religious leader. Viable alternatives for conscientious objectors such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslim women must be made available. The stigma and limitations that Jehovah’s Witnesses face in their daily lives at the hands of the government must be ameliorated. The military must reform its treatment of religious groups and allow equal treatment and freedoms for all individuals regardless of their religious creed. The government must allow for more than 4 religious communities to exist openly and freely in the country. Finally, Eritrea needs to implement the 1997 Constitution which it passed and which guarantees its citizens freedom of religion.